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SUBJECT: LEBANON: UNDERSTANDING MICHEL AOUN'S POPULARITY

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) While his support has dropped since its 2005 peak, Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun remains the most popular Christian political leader in Lebanon. His polling numbers remain high in spite of actions that could have diminished his support, particularly among Lebanese Christians. These include partnering with Hizballah in 2006 and obstructing agreement on electing a consensus president in 2007. Aoun gained his popularity while serving as a successful army commander during the 1975-90 civil war, leading the army in fighting against Syrians, Palestinians, and the Lebanese Forces Christian militia. Many of his supporters have remained steadfast since that time and they give Aoun the benefit of the doubt in all he does. Other factors that boost his support include a fear among his supporters of Sunni domination, Aoun's reputation as an advocate against corruption, and his skills at shifting blame onto his political opponents in the pro-government March 14 coalition. Possible threats to Aoun's popularity among Christians are an election of Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Michel Sleiman as president, since many Christians might look to him as a better Christian alternative, and better messaging and unity among March 14 leaders. End summary.

WHO IS AN AOUNIE?

12. (C) Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun remains popular among his many followers. "Aounies" are frequently spotted in large caravans traversing streets, clad in orange, waving banners, and honking their signature car horn chant. PolOff met with several pollsters, representatives of political NGOs, and FPM's diplomatic relations representative, to understand what drives and sustains Aoun's popularity.

13. (C) According to Michel de Chadarevian of the party, the FPM boasts over 55,000 members. Political parties in Lebanon are associated with one confession but de Chadarevian (hardly an impartial observer, of course) claims that 20 percent of FPM members non-Christians: Druze, Sunni, and Shia. Aoun does not have any clear geographic base, but enjoys support throughout the country. The majority of Aounies are female, and primarily from the middle and lower economic classes. The bulk of Aoun's supporters, said International Republican Institute (IRI) Country Director Sean Walsh, pledged their allegiance to Aoun during the civil war and have remained steadfast ever since, today "giving Aoun the benefit of the

doubt" when he is intemperate in public speeches. Following the script of his party boss, De Chadarevian maintains that the FPM's Memorandum of Understanding with Hizballah is not an alliance, but an agreement advantageous foremost to Lebanese Christians. The reasoning, common among Aounies, is based on a paranoia about the need for Christians to link with Shia to counter Sunni financial and demographic power in Lebanon and the region. Denying that Hizballah's arms are a threat, the Aounies believe instead that Lebanon's Christians are best protected by allying themselves with other minorities, especially powerful ones like Lebanon's heavily armed Shia, against the Sunni.

SOLID ARMY GENERAL WHO FOUGHT FOREIGN OCCUPIERS

¶4. (C) Aoun had a reputable military career, rising to Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander, and is seen as having defended Christian interests during the civil war against the Syrians and the Palestinians. His name became famous while commanding the Eighth Brigade against the Lebanese Forces (LF), a Christian militia led by Samir Geagea, in 1983. Geagea today is the leading Christian member of the pro-government March 14 coalition that Aoun opposes, and the closest rival of Aoun's for political support among the Christian community. According to Rabi H. Haber, Managing Director of Statistics Lebanon, it is considered patriotic to support Aoun because he has the reputation of having having allied with Syria, he fought the Palestinians, and he was in the army, an institution whose leaders and personnel come from all confessions (as opposed to the national police, seen as dominated by Sunni interests). During his two-year term as prime minister, Aoun was considered by his followers to be a legitimate leader in contrast to his predecessor Selim

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Hoss, who was pro-Syrian. Among the circles from which he continues to draw his support, Aoun was well-liked as prime minister, even receiving donations from poor people anxious to support his government.

¶5. (C) In his famous fiery televised speeches, Aoun calls for good governance, transparency and democracy, and discusses issues that matter to the people, such as electricity and the economy. After decades of suffering under corrupt leaders, many Lebanese find Aoun's criticisms of corruption appealing. As in most cult-like groups, Aounies simply reject the well-documented evidence of Aoun's own corruption, including use of public monies for private gain.

HATRED FOR GEMAYEL AND GEAGEA DROVE CHRISTIANS TO AOUN

¶6. (C) Many of those interviewed told PolOff that Aoun's popularity also is driven by people's dislike, even hatred, for other Christian political leaders, former president and Kataeb party leader Amine Gemayel and Lebanese Forces leader Geagea. People are fed up with militias in general and many hold Gemayel and Geagea directly responsible for killing members of their family during the civil war. "Everyone has a Geagea-slaying story," IRI's Walsh said.

¶7. (C) Haber believes the hatred factor is less relevant today because Aoun's popularity base was solidified in the 90's, after the end of the civil war. He cites what he says are positive shifts in Aoun's popularity when he is verbally attacked by March 14 members, specifically pointing to dissident Aounies who return to Aoun following such attacks. Geagea's Lebanese Forces operated three of the most powerful media outlets during the civil war, continued Haber, and waged a media campaign against Aoun. It produced the opposite effect - Aoun's supporters among Muslim populations, Druze, Shia, and Sunnis, liked Aoun even more after the campaign (although, Haber's analysis notwithstanding, evidence suggests that Druze and Sunni support for Aoun

remains quite low).

FEAR OF SUNNI DOMINATION

18. (C) All interviewed agreed that Aoun is seen by his Christian supporters as the defender of Christian rights in Lebanon, an image Aoun works hard to exploit. According to observers, these Christians believe that their biggest threats are the Palestinians and the Lebanese and Saudi Sunnis, and not Hizballah or other Shia groups. Accordingly, these supporters throw their weight behind Aoun and also the Shia community in a classic illustration of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Chris Reid, a consultant for IRI, said that the average Christian perceives the 1989 Taif power-sharing agreement, which weakened Christian influence, as "a Saudi deal that took power from the Christians." Majority leader Saad Hariri is "the wolf at the neck" for these Christians, who attribute the poor economy to Hariri and distrust his close Saudi connections. Christians are concerned about an influx of Saudi tourists "prostituting their women," and the prospect of increased influence by Saudi Arabia, seen by these Christians as a more restrictive society than Iran.

19. (C) These Christians see Hariri, a Sunni, and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt as controlling the March 14 alliance and they buy into Aoun's arguments that it is preferable to ally with the Shia community in order to counter the Sunni influence. These Christians are wary of Druze whom they fought in the civil war, added Reid, and see Aoun as the best defense. They do not believe he is really allied with Hizballah, but see the MOU that Aoun signed with that group as an agreement to keep it controlled. When Aoun feels he is losing support, Haber relayed, he taps into Christian survival fears, loudly opposing Palestinian naturalization, while claiming that the U.S. will sell out the Christians by supporting the permanent settlement of Palestinians in Lebanon.

COMPETITION WITHIN MARCH 14

110. (C) In opinion polls, Aoun receives support from about 40 percent of the Christian population - the highest percentage of any Christian leader, but not a majority. This is a considerable drop from 2005 when he probably could count on 60-70 percent of the Christians. The rest of the Christian

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support is divided among other Christian leaders, the most prominent of whom are in the March 14 coalition. March 14 supporters typically endorse a specific leader, rather than the coalition as a whole, and therefore March 14 Christian leaders compete with each other. Reid, who works on political communication, cited instances where March 14 allies Gemayel and Geagea adjusted their public criticisms of Aoun not because of Aoun but out of concern to not improve the image of the other. They are driven more by this internal jockeying for power than by defeating Aoun. The consequence is that Aoun frequently escapes public denunciations while striking out against March 14.

EFFECTIVE, UNCONTESTED PROPAGANDA

111. (C) Since the beginning of his career in the army, Aoun has been renowned for his catchy slogans. In 1989, he declared a "war of liberation" against Syria and garnered Muslim, Druze, and Christian support. Aoun also gained favor when he called for "Lebanese arms only for the LAF," directed against both Hizballah and the Palestinian camps. Aoun's fiery televised speeches are perceived by Christians as "Aoun telling it like it is." While Aoun's public profile appears to us to be unappealing and lacking in charisma, Haber claims that Aoun is a strong communicator, and proactively interprets events in his favor, such as blaming

March 14 for prolonging the presidential vacuum when it is himself and his allies in the opposition who have resisted the obvious solution to that impasse. Reid noted that Aoun has blamed Hariri's well-known prime ministerial ambitions as the reason for the impasse over the presidency.

¶12. (C) Aoun's popularity is aided by the well-organized structure of FPM. The group is unified, composed of intellectuals, and not "feudal" as March 14 parties can be, stated Reid.

INDEPENDENT CHRISTIANS AS SWING VOTERS

¶13. (C) In the 2005 parliamentary elections, Aoun's party prevailed in the heavily Christian Metn region with over 70 percent of the votes. By contrast, in the 2007 Metn by-elections to fill a vacant parliamentary seat, Aoun's candidate won by mere hundreds of votes, suggesting Aoun's support has declined since 2005, settling at perhaps 40-50 percent of Christians.

¶14. (C) Another possible indicator of a shift away from Aoun among independent Christians is the success of March 14 in elections at professional associations and on campuses. In the most recent elections for offices of the Doctors' Association and the Bar Association, Aoun's candidates lost to March 14 candidates. March 14 also has prevailed at recent student elections at Lebanese American University and the American University of Beirut.

SLEIMAN AS PRESIDENT COULD HURT AOUN

¶15. (C) All observers told PolOff that the election of LAF Commander Michel Sleiman as president could fill a void for independent Christians. Voters who dislike Geagea, Gemayel, and Aoun currently do not have any strong Christian leader to rally around. Those interviewed pointed to a desire by these independent Christians to support someone new, and Sleiman, with his solid, scandal-free military background and successful experience as LAF Commander, is a strong choice. A Sleiman presidency could draw even more supporters who want to side with the victor. Sleiman has told us that if he does not become president, he will leave the army and embark on a political career to tap into this Christian support.

AOUN'S POPULARITY BASE DOES NOT WAVER

¶16. (C) While his overall popularity has declined significantly since the 2005 elections, what Aoun has lost has not all accrued to March 14. It seems as though those who no longer back him were never a strong part of Aoun's base to begin with, but rather supported him in order to oppose something else. Among his core supporters, Aoun's popularity is enduring. The political communication experts whom PolOff interviewed believed that better messaging and greater unity by March 14 leaders could help sway the public against Aoun. Reid believes Christian support for Aoun is

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not based on substantive issues, pointing to opinion polls on important Christian issues such as UN Security Council Resolution 1559, Christian internally displaced persons, and Palestinian naturalization, which indicated that Christians who support March 14 and Aoun share the same beliefs. Moving them into the March 14 camp, however, has proven to be a difficult task, with Aoun every day playing on Christian fears of marginalization at the hands of March 14's Muslim leaders.

FELTMAN